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## MYTH AND FICTION AS EMPLOYED IN THE BIBLE.

### A SYMPOSIUM.

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As THE subject is worded, it suggests the questions: Shall the presence of myth and fiction in the sacred volume be admitted or denied? On what ground can it be either admitted or denied? And, if admitted, how does it affect Christian doctrine?

The denial of the presence of any form of literature in the Scriptures can appear either as a conclusion reached after a careful survey of their content, or as the result of a judgment based on the character of the Bible as a body of divinely inspired writings. If it be the latter only, then there can be plainly no doubt that such a denial is unscientific, and should be summarily set aside by the earnest and honest seeker after truth. What is and what is not consistent with the divine origin and authority of Scripture must be determined, not by an *a priori* logical method, but by an induction of facts. The question whether the existence of myth and fiction is consistent with inspiration and canonicity must be answered after the question of their presence or absence has been settled, and not before. To form an idea of what kind of literature one should expect in the Bible, and then proceed to reduce all the kinds found to these, is to re-enact the fabled Procrustes; only with greater cruelty, because in this case it is not the mere bodies of men that are tortured, but the contents of a divinely given volume which has been the means of spiritual life to millions. If myth and legend are not proper forms through which God can reveal his mind, then why should parables and allegories be believed to be such? And where is the line to be drawn between those literary forms which the Spirit can employ and those which he cannot? And on what authority shall such a line be drawn? The absolute impossibility of answering these very legitimate and inevitable questions should prove a final and effective mode of dealing with the denial of their presence upon mere *a priori* grounds.

But it may be asked, in using the inductive method, what

shall be done with the interpretations of the earlier portions of Scripture by the writers of the later? If a New Testament author employs an Old Testament passage as true history which is apparently fiction or myth, shall not that fact assure the modern believing reader that the apparent fiction is in reality history? Our answer is: only in case it was essential to the New Testament writer's purpose and design that he should be very careful and precise with reference to the implications of his method of using the Old Testament. A thorough induction of the facts in the case shows that the writers of the New Testament do not use the Old with more than the ordinary care and precision. Their inspiration does not seem to make it necessary that they should reproduce with machine-like coldness and correctness the words, or even the meaning, of their predecessors. And if in these things they act freely, much more so in the less important matter of mere literary form.

While, therefore, conclusions drawn from apparent views of later Scripture writers regarding earlier passages or books may help in answering the question of the literary form of the latter, they cannot be indiscriminately used as foreclosing the question.

But if the question be open, and it be possible that myth and fiction exist in the Bible; and if, further, certain passages be found on close examination to belong to this type of literature, it remains to ask what bearing the discovery would have on Christian doctrine. In answer, we observe: (1) Our conception of the Scripture will remain altogether intact. The principles involved in the use of the forms in question are the same as those underlying the use of parable and allegory. (2) Our interpretation of the passages found to be myths or legends must change to conform to their newly discovered character. (3) Our fundamental doctrines will remain untouched; in no case do they depend on any single passage or set of passages that may possibly be shown to belong to the class of writings known as myth or legend. (4) In unessential matters some little light may be thrown on the character and work of God in the redemption of man from sin.

A. C. ZENOS.

That the early Hebrews received, along with their other inheritances from their Semitic forefathers, many popular myths, is shown by the frequent references to them in the prophetic, and especially the poetic, books, like Job and the later apocalyptic writings. Of these the story of Jehovah's combat with Rahab or the Leviathan was the best known. Naturally myths figured more prominently in the minds of the common people than in the thought of their inspired teachers. While the earlier prophets did not accept or openly attack them, they usually indicated their mild disapproval by ignoring them. Only later poets and prophets, who lived when the popular belief in myths was dead, dared employ their imagery as illustrations, very much as modern writers utilize the figures suggested by Greek mythology.

Israel's belief in one supreme God was irreconcilable with the premises assumed in most of the Semitic myths which the monuments have disclosed. The exalted ethical standards of the Hebrew teachers were also hostile to their often immoral implications. The result is that the Bible is characterized among the literary collections coming from antiquity by the comparative absence of the mythological element. The chief traces of this are found in the earliest stories, where the dependence upon ancient Semitic tradition is greatest, as, for example, in the narratives of the creation, the garden of Eden, the flood, and the tower of Babel. Since in certain cases it is now possible to compare the older versions with the Hebrew, the care with which the biblical writers eliminated polytheistic and immoral elements is clearly apparent. Purified, ennobled, and consecrated to an exalted purpose, these ancient myths have almost entirely lost their mythological character and have become the apt medium through which are conveyed some of the noblest spiritual truths ever presented to man.

The secondary aim which influenced Israel's teachers thus to utilize them was evidently that they might save the people from the debasing influence of these popular myths. Thus, in the story of the sons of God and the daughters of men (Gen. 6:1-4), where the mythological character of the tradition is most evident, the familiar folk-tale is briefly introduced by the prophet in

order that he may brand its immoral implications with Jehovah's disapproval.

A modern preacher's hearers do not stop to inquire what was the genesis of the stories which he uses in illustrating his sermons, or whether or not they are strictly scientific or historical in every detail. If they aid in making clear his message that is sufficient. The permanent religious value of the traditions, fables, parables, and allegories which enrich the literature of the Bible likewise depends upon the character of the spiritual messages which they convey, and is independent of their scientific and historical accuracy. Their vividness, variety, and literary beauty enhance immeasurably their efficiency as a medium for imparting religious truth. Their function is to appeal to the minds and wills of men and thus, by inspiring noble thoughts and acts, to make history, rather than merely record it.

CHARLES F. KENT.

YALE DIVINITY SCHOOL,  
New Haven, Conn.

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The last generation of American Christians was brought up in the undoubting faith that every portion of the Bible was true in the same sense and way in which the *Nautical Almanac* and the United States census reports are true. The first chapter of Genesis was presumed to contain the same sort of scientific information that was found in a geological survey, and distinct agreement upon lithological and zoölogical facts was expected between the two. We should have shuddered at the profane irreverence of the suggestion that upon those sacred pages were myth, legend, fable, allegory, romance, and idealized history.

This strange mistake of the last generation arose from a failure to perceive the nature, history, and uses of literature. The Bible is a literature. Rather it is an anthology—a collection of the divinest flowers of a vast garden of literature. The very name "Bible" is historically a plural, and connotes the fundamental fact of multiplicity and diversity. Scientific memoirs and statistical tables are not literature. They cannot fulfil the functions of literature. They are inorganic. Literature is thought

vitalized in forms that live before the imagination. Not that the Bible does not contain legal codes, genealogies, and abundant plain matters of fact woven into its marvelous tapestry.

The Bible is not only literature: it is oriental literature. Its birthplace is the "land of the cypress and myrtle." "'Tis the clime of the east; 'tis the land of the sun." There the atmosphere is more effulgent, colors are more gorgeous, emotions are more demonstrative, the imagination is more exuberant than with us. Western scholars have, in recent years, exhumed the long-buried cities of the East and have translated the cuneiform writing of their clay tablets. They have studied the ancient and modern life of western Asia. An unexpected result has followed. They have discovered the key to the spirit and meaning of large portions of the Old Testament.

To infer at once that if any portions of the Bible are imaginative, they are therefore false and worthless, is wholly unwarranted. To say that the devout scholars who have discovered these facts are attacking the Bible is unjust.

Fiction is a highly useful part of every literature. Outside of the Bible it reigns supreme. Look at your child's library—*Hiawatha*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Lady of the Lake*, *Mrs. Wiggs*, *Prince and Pauper*, Andersen's and Grimm's tales, Hawthorne's *Wonder Book*—fiction every one. Adults are no less busy over fiction, and this whatever language they read. For the masterpiece of every literature is a fiction. Witness Homer, the Greek tragedians, Vergil, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Goethe and Schiller, Browning and Tennyson. Walter Scott and the innumerable train of the novelists find readers by hundreds where historians and scientists scarce find units.

Are all of these works of the imagination false and pernicious, and is this universal preference of the reading world only another proof of man's degeneracy? By no means. Fiction is a normal instrument for delighting, instructing, inspiring, and ennobling. It is the readiest vehicle for conveying truth.

Plainly there are different kinds of truth. The truth of the report of the fish commission is of one sort. The truth of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is of another sort. No people named like Mrs.

Stowe's characters lived in those places at the dates indicated. But her book is a true picture of what was possible under the institution of slavery in the early fifties.

Now that we think of it, the world's most precious pictures are pure fictions. Raphael never saw the Madonna. Rubens was not present at the descent from the cross. Yet each painter has portrayed truths that have enriched the heart-life of Christendom.

It is of the utmost consequence that we ascertain just what sort of truth is to be recognized in each portion of the Scriptures. Many ridiculous mistakes, and not a few disastrous ones, have arisen from confusion here. The story of woman's creation will forever remain a divine statement of the most blessed fact in social life, the identification of husband and wife. But when admitted to be an allegory it at once ceases to be a bludgeon to be used on the head of the anthropologist who is honestly investigating the origin of the human species.

WILLIAM G. BALLANTINE.

INTERNATIONAL Y. M. C. A. TRAINING SCHOOL,  
Springfield, Mass.

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We should, perhaps, first consider the *a priori* probability as to whether there can be in an inspired book myths, legends, fiction, or any narrative which contains an imaginative element. Since anthropology has made it clear that all peoples have passed through a stage of development in which myths played an important part, if no myth could find a place in an inspired book it would follow that God could not reveal himself at all to the human race during large portions of its history. As few of us would be willing to take this position, we ought not to be shocked to find some forms of myth in the Bible.

Myths are, after all, only primitive man's hypotheses. Where a scientific age invents a hypothesis to account for observed facts or experiences, early man told a story which embodied his explanation. The divine Spirit can work in harmony with the one as well as with the other.

Similar considerations apply to legends, allegories, imagina-

tive poetry, and parable. When properly controlled and applied to the proper tasks, no part of the human mind performs nobler or more spiritual work than the imagination. We should, then, *a priori*, find no difficulty in discovering works of the imagination in the Bible.

The clearest trace of a mythical element in the Old Testament is in Genesis, chap. 6, where angels are said to have consorted with women. The purpose of this narrative was to account for the extraordinary ability of heroes. It embodies in a crude way the truth that genius and inspiration are from heaven.

Modern investigation has clearly shown that an early Babylonian myth underlies the first chapter of Genesis. In this case, however, that clearness of insight which is begotten by inspiration has so transformed the crude material of the myth as to make it practically a different narrative.

That legendary narratives are embodied in the Bible can hardly now be questioned. The parallel accounts of patriarchal life, which are true to human experiences, but which in some instances are mutually exclusive when told of the same event, indicate that here, as in all good story-telling, an imaginative element enters.

The noblest example of imaginative poetry in the Bible is the book of Job. Few will now be found to maintain that it is all a literal record of fact, but in it deep problems of human experience are presented, and are so treated as beautifully to portray the growth of a soul under suffering.

The book of Jonah is best understood as an allegory of Israel's history. Israel, faithless to duty, is Jonah. The monster who swallows the fugitive nation is Babylon. But even after the exile the appointed task seemed irksome to the chosen people.

Our Savior himself has in his parables forever consecrated the fruit of the imagination, or fiction, to religious service. Sometimes, as in the parable of the nobleman who went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return, we can trace a historical kernel, since both Herod the Great and Archelaus had done this very thing. Even then the picture as



drawn by our Lord is partly imaginary, though based upon an incident of history. The parable of the rich man who planned to pull down his barns and build greater is based upon a poetical passage in the fifth chapter of Ecclesiasticus, itself a work of the imagination. True, the form in which our Lord put it is far more powerful than that in which the son of Sirach left it, because of the superiority of our Lord's imagination. Again, the parable of the wicked servant, whose lord delayed but returned unexpectedly, has been shown to be based on a pre-Christian tale of a secular character, which was widely read among the Jews.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes, as in the parable of the prodigal son, we are able to trace no antecedents. So far as we can tell, it is a pure work of Christ's imagination; but even so it contains more real truth than most of the incidents which have happened in history, and better than they has for nineteen hundred years conveyed a knowledge of God's forgiving love.

GEORGE A. BARTON.

BRYN MAWR COLLEGE,  
Bryn Mawr, Pa.

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No difference of opinion exists among Christians as to the value of fiction in the Bible when the instance in question is the parables of Jesus; and this instance naturally carries with it the fable of Jotham, and all similar illustrative anecdotes whose fictitious origin is self-evident. In older days it failed to carry with it the drama of Job, and among a great number of Christians no doubt still fails to carry with it the fable of Jonah, and the assumed character of the "Preacher" (Ecclesiastes), because to these it is not yet clear that the authors of Jonah and Ecclesiastes do not wish their readers to take the narratives they relate as sober fact. This, however, is simply a question of interpretation. Every rational Christian will today admit the possibility of two opinions as to these authors' real intention, and must therefore leave the range of possible fiction in Scripture somewhat open, admitting freely the legitimacy of its use where there is no intent to deceive.

<sup>2</sup> See J. R. HARRIS, *Story of Ahikar*, p. ix.

The question is somewhat altered when we approach the domain of legend, or narrative regarded by the author as fact and so communicated, but containing an element larger or smaller of fiction. In this case the use of imaginative material by the author is unconscious. By far the greater part of this is not of his own creation, but represents the gradual accumulation, perhaps of generations, perhaps of centuries. All students of history know that short of miracle it is impossible for any report, even by the most accurate of modern scientific observers, to be wholly free from this. The amount varies with the scientific qualifications of the reporter. For Bible students the question is whether Scripture does or does not present this miracle.

If it were the purpose of God in Scripture to furnish critical historians with an accurate record of the past, geologists with an infallible text-book of the earth's structure and history, biologists and astronomers with similar ready-made sciences, the miracle would be readily supposable. No one now supposes such to be the case; but many think inaccuracies even on points not essential to the author's purpose would be sufficient—at least if present in sufficient number—to discredit the writing generally.

We may probably dismiss the extreme view that *any* degree of error, however small, discredits the Scripture, because the most strenuous supporters of this now obsolescent theory of the nature of inspiration no longer maintain the *perpetuation* of an inerrant Bible, but admit errors in that which we have; so that the discussion becomes purely academic. On the other hand, it must be frankly admitted that a high degree of historical inaccuracy directly involving the author's *didactic purpose*, as in the case of an evangelist, undoubtedly does discredit the writing. That for which as loyal friends of Scripture we must contend, therefore, is not the kind of accuracy which results in *critical history*, a product equally unserviceable and unintelligible to the ages of the Scripture writers; but such general trustworthiness on matters of current tradition as belongs to the simple-hearted and honest chronicler, combined with the insight and fire of the prophet who embodies in the story of his time, or former times,

as understood by men about him, the divine message of which he knows himself the bearer. A greater or less infusion of legend is rather a mark of authenticity than a detriment to such a writing; at least miraculous exemption from it is quite needless for its moral and religious efficacy, even in later ages, and therefore should not be assumed.

The more extreme case of intentional deception (*pia fraus*), a phase of which may be present in 2 Peter and perhaps elsewhere, falls outside our subject.

BENJAMIN W. BACON.

YALE DIVINITY SCHOOL,  
New Haven, Conn.

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A diligent and sympathetic student of the gospels—if I may be permitted to confine my observations to a single portion of the Bible—must be impressed with the conviction that their authors were men of simple minds and honest hearts, who were not inventing “cunningly devised fables,” but were putting on record what they believed to be the truth.

At the same time they were not critical historians: they give but brief and fragmentary accounts of the life and teachings of their Master; they had but slight interest in questions of the date and order of the events which they record; and they leave no trace of any effort to verify the incidents which they relate.

Moreover, there can be no doubt that these gospels were written from forty to sixty years after the occurrence of the events recorded, and the most diligent inquiry fails to discover the forms and methods in which these traditions were preserved during those years. Two of the gospels were written by men who were not personal associates of Jesus, and there seems to be convincing evidence that the other two are not preserved in the form in which the immediate disciples of Jesus left them.

This question, therefore, forces itself upon every open-minded student: Was there not opportunity, during the period in which these stories were passing from one to another in oral tradition or fragmentary writings, for misunderstandings, unconscious changes, and legendary accretions?

If we seriously face this question and, with this possibility in

mind, examine certain parts of the gospels, we shall find much reason to give it an affirmative answer. The first two chapters of Luke give much evidence of being a Christian idyl, enshrining in poetic imagery the story of the beginning of a beautiful and gracious life. The greatly varied and seemingly conflicting stories of the appearances of the risen Lord may be accounted for by recognizing the ease with which excited minds would relate so great a fact with imaginary details.

There are other incidents in the records of Jesus' life which may require similar treatment. The story of the blighted fig tree, found in Matthew and Mark but not in Luke or John, may have come from the misunderstanding of such a parable as Luke (13:6-9) records. It is not impossible that the stories of the multiplication of loaves and fishes, and the transformation of water into wine, were originally parables which were transformed in the tradition. And the perplexing, if not repulsive, story of the demons and the swine may be a mythical addition to a true report of one of Jesus' gracious deeds.

The discovery or the suspicion of such an element in the gospels will not decrease their real value for us. That value centers in those things which cannot be shaken—the grace and truth which appeared in Jesus Christ. These shine in records which have always been acknowledged to be brief and fragmentary. To admit that they may also be, in some parts, inexact and legendary will not decrease faith in the words of Him who spoke as no other man has spoken, and whose life owes its power to inspire and save, not to a full and perfect record, but to its direct appeal to the convictions and the hearts of men.

WILLIAM H. RYDER.

ANDOVER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY,  
Andover, Mass.

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In any proper study of the subject, "Myth and Fiction as Employed in the Bible," there are evidently two questions to be considered: (1) Are these forms of literature found in the Bible? (2) If so, how ought this fact to affect our confidence in the Bible as a final authority for religious belief and conduct?

The first is a simple question of fact. It is not to be answered by appealing to any religious or rationalistic claims in regard to what the Bible must be or cannot be. The true answer can be reached only by a correct use of the principles of literary study and historical science. We must examine the characteristics of structure, expression, and style found in each of the biblical writings and from these, by means of the principles of general literary science, determine its true literary form. Or, we may compare the statements made, and the apparent history presented in any biblical writing with the facts established and the course of human history determined by a sound historical science, and so come to know whether this writing was intended to give us history, myth, or fiction.

If by either or both of these methods, which are the only legitimate methods to be used, we find that myth or fiction or both are literary forms which have been employed to any extent in the Bible, we ought not on this account, unless something more than just this can be shown, to have any less confidence in the Bible as our final authority for religious belief and conduct; because myth and fiction are both lawful and valuable means for the teaching of moral and religious truth. At any rate fiction was so used by our Lord himself. Even in this practical and scientific age, the character of a large part of the literature that is daily coming from the press shows that fiction and myth have not yet lost their value for the moral and religious teacher. What a knowledge of his own nature has shown man to be good for his use, God surely may also have found to be good for his use. Nor would it of necessity affect the value of the Bible, if the writer, in using for his purpose myth or fiction, supposed he was using history. If one uses the story of Washington and the hatchet to teach the duty and the beauty of truthfulness, the teaching is just as true and the duty just as real if the story is proved to be a fiction or a legend. Only when the truth or value of the teaching depends upon the historicity of the alleged fact does it become impossible to use myth or fiction for the purpose of teaching. If, for example, the resurrection of Jesus was not a historical fact, all that is said

to be real in the New Testament because of that fact becomes unreal. But it has never been justly claimed that the truth of the Bible teaching depends upon the historicity of its facts except when those facts are the fundamental facts of Christianity itself.

SYLVESTER BURNHAM.

HAMILTON THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY,  
Hamilton, N. Y.

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We may keep our minds so close to the details of a question that we cannot see the question itself. In dealing with the point before us, the very terms we use are so irritating to our piety, being involved in so many entangling alliances, that we need to take a good look at the Bible as a whole in order to keep our heads cool and clear.

The Bible is the book that gives us the key to salvation. It enshrines those ideals of life which, embodied in our Savior, fill us with joyous certitude regarding the issues of the higher life. It is the book of true religion. Now, true religion puts in play all faculties that are genuinely human. And among the foremost of them is imagination. High imagination is essential to noble living.

The Bible, being the book of the noblest living, exhibits the faculty of imagination in its full strength. For imagination is the power whereby men see their ideals. And only through clear vision of the supreme ideals is the will saved from feebleness. We must, then, look for the work of the imagination in the Bible. The next of kin to the prophets of the Old and New Testaments, the men who, under God, gave us our Scriptures, is the great poet, not the modern critic. It is conceivable that God might have chosen for this work men bound by the duties of historical research, bent upon reaching the original facts of history. He might have done so, though it would be a vast strain on our faith to suppose it. But he did not. He chose the prophets, men who should interpret nature and history in the light of saving certitude regarding the divine unity, the incarnation, and our hope of the kingdom of God.

How would the prophet handle the material he found under

his hand? His people's past came to him in the form of legends. Now, the characteristic of the legend, contrasted with history in the scientific sense, is that it carries the past in the living memory, without the aid of books. Even we, with all our literary helps, find it impossible to get into vital relationship with the past without carrying into it our own thoughts. How much more in an age when all that men considered vital in history was in their heads? The legend blends present feeling with past fact. The prophet, who without imagination would have been as a preacher without a voice, took the legends of his people and, reading his own message into them, wrote, for example, the noble history called Genesis. The process was as honest and inevitable as that whereby our Supreme Court finds the principles of its decisions in the Constitution.

The prophet also found under his hand myths regarding the beginnings of the world. We dislike that word "myths." But, properly understood, the myth was a highly imaginative hypothesis put forward to make nature seem intelligible. The prophet took these hypotheses from his people, or borrowed them from his neighbors, and out of them shaped the noble picture of Creation.

The Bible, being the supreme book of religion and conduct, gives full play to the constructive imagination. Only through the imagination can men vividly realize the great ends of life.

HENRY S. NASH.

EPISCOPAL THEOLOGICAL SCHOOL,  
Cambridge, Mass.

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Much perplexity and some sorrow have been caused to many who love the Bible by the view, which is held today by most scholars, and seems to be gaining ground, that certain things in the Bible that have commonly been regarded as historical are in reality mythical or legendary. Now, there are really two questions here, which must be carefully kept apart: (1) Is everything in the Bible which looks like history really history? and (2) if not, is the Bible on that account to be rejected? The first is a purely scientific question, to be settled by the ordinary laws of

historical evidence; the second is to be settled by considering the function of the Bible.

Nobody doubts the essential trustworthiness of biblical history from the time of David. But now this question has to be frankly faced: Do the stories of the early world, of the patriarchal and Mosaic times, make the same impression upon the mind as the history recorded in the books of Samuel? The story of David's life moves about among incidents with the like of which we ourselves are familiar; it is history much as we find it elsewhere. But can we say the same for the life of Abraham, or the story of the wilderness? There the narrative is full, for example, of divine appearances, to which we have no parallel in history as we know it. Now, if it be urged that this is just the unique thing in Israel's history, the answer is simply that it is not unique, but that it is a familiar feature of all *early* literature. Homer is full of it. This undeniable fact rather suggests that we here have to do with the early man's poetic way of describing powerful religious facts.

Again, we have to remember that the stories which present difficulties like these are nearly all from a very early time, when it is practically certain that the facts were not recorded in writing, but were handed on, as among other peoples, by tradition. Hardly anyone would maintain today that we have in Genesis, chap. 1, a literal story of the creation of the world in seven days; science has taught us otherwise. And what is true of the creation story *may* at least be true of the patriarchal stories. If the dates are correct, Abraham comes 1,000 years before Moses. What guarantee can we possibly have that a story, not fixed by writing, passed from mouth to mouth without modification across a whole millenium? Therefore, although the story appears as history, it is not unreasonable to regard it as embodying tradition rather than history in the strict sense.

But if this be so, has it any place in the Bible? To say that it has not is to imply that nothing has any place in the Bible but history. Now (1) that is a piece of unwarranted dogmatism of which no one who knows anything of the mysterious ways of God in other spheres should be guilty; and (2) it is directly



contradicted by the facts. For it is as plain as noonday that God has, in the Bible, used imaginative as well as historical writing in the presentation of religious truth. Does anyone seriously suppose that the magnificent speeches in the book of Job were composed extempore by Job and his friends sitting around an ash-heap? Here it is beyond question that the most powerful presentation of some of the most important truths in the Bible is really a creation of the imagination, though resting no doubt on a slender basis of tradition or fact. The story of Job belongs to a different class of literature from the story of Abraham; but it proves that religious truth not only may be, but actually is, taught in the Bible through other media than that of history. And what shall we say of the parables? Very few would commit the mistake of supposing that they were history; everyone allows them to be the graphic and pictorial embodiment of ethical or religious truth.

This is enough to dispose of the contention that what seems like a recital of fact must necessarily be fact. It is not the historicity, but the religious purpose of a story, that justifies its presence in the Bible. The material at the disposal of the biblical writers came from many quarters, doubtless most of it from history, but some of it also from tribal tradition, mythical stories of creation, etc.; but the material itself is transfigured by the presence of the living God shining through it. The biblical writers are not primarily historians; first and last, they are religious teachers who employ every means at their disposal—history, tradition, parable, romance—to illustrate their own inspired vision of God, and through that to bring their people to Him.

JOHN E. MCFADYEN.

KNOX COLLEGE,  
Toronto, Can.